

LEAVING

by

Bill VanPatten

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HE ADJUSTS THE focus with the hint of a twist, squinting into the eyepiece.

“You’re right,” he says, “that’s Jupiter, not a star.”

I want to say, “I told you so.” Instead, I look at the black inky above, perforated with the tiniest of diamonds, and I know that some are stars, some are planets, and some are galaxies. I could name many of them for him, but I don’t. He would just think I’m showing off. And I probably would be.

I zip up my hoodie, glad I layered before we left the house. I don’t know if there is a real chill in the air or if it’s just the slackening of my blood flow. Terminally ill people often feel cold. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, our bodies silently slip toward the final shut down.

I haven’t told him I’m sick. He has no right to know. He’ll find out when he needs to find out. I suck in some of the mountain air, letting the scent of pine tickle my nostrils and enter my lungs. I want my ashes scattered up here. The sky is so clear at night. I could look up at the stars for all eternity. Well, not for all eternity. Even the universe will die someday. But not anytime soon.

He swivels the telescope to aim it in another direction.

“It’s all so vast,” he says as he bends over once more to peer through the lens. “It’s humbling.”

Yes, I think, the universe is vast and it is humbling. If he only knew that I am going to leave this place by the age of forty-one, that

a four-decade life is nothing compared to a 13 billion-year-old universe, and that on this tiny planet in a spiraling arm of the Milky Way, we are invisible.

And yet, we are here.

My husband and I have been together for ten years. I think the last two have been out of habit. I knew by the sixth year we would never celebrate a silver anniversary. His last affair was the one I couldn't forgive, the one that smashed into me like an asteroid striking the Earth. I had no fight left in me, couldn't do the work of saving our relationship anymore. That was six months ago. I was going to leave him, but my test results offered me a different kind of exit.

I study him as he once again maneuvers the telescope to a different spot in the sky. He is movie-star handsome—a Matt Bomer look-alike with dark hair and blue eyes, toned, hand-made by God for Armani. He is an architect and, by all accounts, a catch. My friends all told me so at the beginning. I'd had boyfriends before, but he was the one I fell in love with, the one who exalted me, made me feel as attractive as he was. I ate it all up, gobbled every "I love you" because I was hungry for words that would break the shackles of insecurity forged from a broken childhood.

"I see something that looks like a galaxy," he says. "Come here and tell me if I'm right."

I step toward him and close one eye while I press the other against the rubber cup of the eyepiece. I tell him yes, he's right, it's Andromeda--named after the maiden chained to the rock to be ravaged by the sea monster, Cetus. She was saved by Perseus, who descended from the sky on the back of Pegasus, ready with sword and Medusa's head. The irony doesn't escape me. I'm chained to a rock, but I will die on that rock. There is no one on a winged horse who will swoop down and rescue me.

I've already lost ten pounds, but he hasn't noticed. My doctor says that I will lose more. The cancer that worms its way around my organs will continue to suppress my appetite. I will begin to look sallow, and my skin will sag. I've declined all treatments. Why prolong the inevitable to gain a few months? What I'd like is another

forty years—another four decades so that I can leave my Matt Bomer husband, take everything that’s mine and start over, have a happy ending, find a Perseus.

Living well is the best revenge.

But I don’t have the time or luxury to live well. My revenge is to draw up a will in which everything that is mine is left to a foundation, to dictate the terms of my body’s disposal, to leave all of this in the hands of my cousin, to take all the power over my death away from him. I want to die in front of him, take one last look and whisper into his ear, “It’s over. I’m leaving you.”

Sometimes, dying well is the best revenge.

I took up astronomy when I was ten. I was an only child in a failed marriage, my father abandoning us to take up with a woman at work. They moved to Seattle and I never saw him again. I became the son he never wanted, the boy he couldn’t love. My mother turned to drinking, and by the time I was fourteen, I’d become an expert at putting her to bed, cleaning up the occasional vomit, and hiding our life from friends and neighbors. The nighttime sky called to me, beckoned me with its dark velvetiness. With my mother passed out somewhere in the house, I’d slip outside and lie on the grass, looking up at the heavens. I used books from the library to learn which stars were which, and what planets I could see with the naked eye. I got my first telescope when I turned sixteen, my Ph.D. in astrophysics by the time I was twenty-six.

And now, four months past my fortieth birthday, I find myself at 6,000 feet above sea level at the edge of the Sierras. I watch my husband as he pretends to take interest in something I love. I think about what will happen to me, how the stars are the source of all life, and how I will give mine back to them. My molecules will rise into the air, be carried off to other parts of California, maybe beyond, and become part of this planet. Someday, the sun—our very own star—will expand and swallow the Earth, and I will have fulfilled the destiny of every living and non-living thing: to give back to the stars, give back to the universe.

“You look cold,” he says.

I nod and he says it's time to pack it up and head home. I let him disassemble the telescope and place it in the back of our BMW. I lift my head, take in more of the pine scent, and let my gaze sweep across the expanse of night. It still beckons me, telling me it's waiting for me.

I will be part of a star. Someday.